

Seven Steps into Getting ESP Students to Write Technical Reports

By Julio C. Gimenez

More than half of a technical professionals working time is spent on some form of writing (Okoye 1994). Therefore, writing technical reports is an essential skill ESP students need to develop for their future professional careers.

I have had great success with the following 7 steps, aimed at providing guidelines to ESP students learning to write their first reports.

Getting Started

Before beginning the activity, each student receives a worksheet with different sections which they must complete after having covered each of the steps (see Figure 1 below). Students may then consult their worksheet whenever they write a report.

In completing the worksheet, students carry out most of the activities on a cooperative basis. They always work in pairs, discussing ideas, comparing results, and then sharing them with the rest of the class. This procedure prepares them for a more interactive participation in the professional community of which they will become members. (Ramani 1988)

Step 1: What is a Report?

I have found that most students in my ESP courses have little, if any, knowledge of what a report really is. They are more acquainted with other writing genres, such as the editorial, the essay, or the newspaper or magazine article. Therefore, I start the writing lesson by giving each student a chart outlining the main features of the genre under consideration. Students then pair up to compare and contrast these characteristics. This activity helps students become aware of what a report is all about. After analyzing the basic characteristics of a report (objectivity, intended for more than one reader), students state what a report is not (an expression of opinion, a summary of known information).

Another possibility is to provide students with authentic reports (Ellis & Johnson 1994) for them to analyze. In cooperative environments, students may be asked to provide the examples themselves (Okoye 1994). Finally, and regardless of the methodology followed, students prepare a check list containing the most typical features of a report, which becomes the worksheet that they receive at the beginning of the class.

Step 2: What is a Report for?

Defining the purpose of a report is our second step. To deal with this aspect of report writing, students are presented with a set of questions they discuss in pairs. The set contains questions such as "What is your report for?", "Is your report intended for more than one purpose?"

Once every pair has considered each of the questions, the whole class discusses the answers and chooses the most appropriate ones. Students use the selected answers to complete section 2 of the worksheet.

Step 3: Who are My Readers?

Knowing the audience is important for any writer. It is essential, for the report writer. Thus, before writing a report, students proceed to complete section 3 of their worksheet.

Before dealing with the steps that follow, we make an analysis of the previous steps. The students' choices of purpose and audience will have direct bearing on the language, organization, content, and presentation of their reports (Singh and Mitali De Sarkar 1994).

Step 4: How Do I Have to Organize the Information?

Selection of information is a key aspect in the organization of a report. The selection will be most certainly limited by constraints of time, place, and importance of the topic dealt with. Students select those items (relevancy, accuracy, facts, and opinions) they believe are most applicable and complete section 4 of the worksheet.

Step 5: What Do I Have to Consider before Writing My Report?

At this stage of the writing exercise, we discuss the possible topics for a report for "their companies' next meeting." Then, students consider writing a draft outline of the report, consulting with other students and with both their subject matter teacher and their language teacher. This aspect of team teaching is quite relevant in ESP environments (Dudley-Evans 1984, Gimenez 1995, Okoye 1994). It encourages cooperation among students and gives the activity a sense of worth, so important for the language class.

Immediately after the discussion period, students start the actual writing of a report, which, due to class time constraints, is finished at home using the ideas discussed in class.

Step 6: How Do I Have to Edit My Report?

When students believe their report is ready for reviewing, the whole class discusses which are the most relevant aspects to check: spelling mistakes, unclear sentences, ambiguous referencing, and the like. In pairs, students then design a short checklist with which they will complete their worksheet.

Step 7: What Does an Effective Report Look Like?

Once, the report has been edited, students start considering aspects that have to do with the report presentation process.

They discuss at length aspects such as dividing the report into subsections, adding tables and graphics to enhance it and to aid understanding. Finally, students once more have a discussion in order to reach an agreement on the most relevant aspects to be included in their worksheets.

Conclusion

English programs for ESP as well as EST and Business students should aim at developing students' professional performance- "training learners to become operationally effective" in Ellis and Johnson's words (1994).

These seven steps have proven highly successful in helping students develop report writing, one of the skills which will make them become "operationally effective." By the same token, these steps have also made ESP writing classes more cooperative in nature. Students have worked with one another in the writing process while their subject matter teachers have guided the language teacher so that students practice virtually the same activity in English as in their mother tongue.

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Figure 1

Report Writing: A Checklist	
1. A report is:	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
2. Defining the purpose:	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
3. Knowing the readers:	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
4. Organizing information:	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
5. Before writing:	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
6. Editing a report:	<hr/> <hr/>

7. Presenting a report
